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SUBJECT: LATVIA: USG ENGAGEMENT ON WOMEN'S ISSUES

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¶1. Embassy Riga conducts a range of activities to draw increased attention to women's issues. While programs that focus exclusively on these topics are rare, Post incorporates key messages on women's issues in other activities, from visitor's programs to policy discussions with the Ministry of Interior. Our most prominent work has been in the realm of trafficking in persons, which in Latvia most commonly involves trafficking of women for sexual exploitation.

Embassy Riga recognizes that while women play prominent roles in Latvian politics and enjoy relative gender equity in most fields, critical issues such as violence against women deserve greater attention. In response to reftel, Embassy Riga presents this description of our efforts in this field and opportunities for further engagement.

Women's Issues in Latvia

¶2. Women have risen to many positions of importance in Latvia - they can be seen at the highest levels of business, government, and civil society. For example, former President Vaira Vike-Freiberga remains one of the most trusted public figures in the country. Measures of women's health and political participation are similar to those for men. Women are guaranteed rights equal to men under the law, and legal protection against job or wage discrimination. However, many problems remain. There is still a wage gap, in line with the average for EU countries. While they hold many prominent positions, women are still under-represented in leadership positions both in government and the private sector.

¶3. Perhaps the most pressing women's issues in Latvia relate to violence against women. Reliable statistics are scarce, but domestic violence is widely considered to be frequent and often goes unreported. Trafficking in Persons (TIP) remains an area of concern, primarily due to Latvia's role as a source country for women trafficked for commercial sexual exploitation. A particular challenge in addressing these problems is the relative prevalence of "blame-the-victim" attitudes, which suppress reporting of crimes. Deep budget cuts due to the severe effects of the economic crisis in Latvia may reduce the level of supportive services available for some victims.

Current Activities and Opportunities

¶4. Embassy Riga engages in women's issues through both ongoing efforts and special events. The following examples are those that we would identify as "best practices."

-- Trafficking in Persons (TIP): TIP has been the highest-priority item in our work on women's issues. Latvia was placed on the Tier 2 Watchlist for the first time in the most recent TIP report, adding urgency to our long-standing efforts to work with the GOL on reducing trafficking. In cooperation with the International Organization for Migration, the Embassy conducted in-person training

for educators to help them teach students about TIP and how to fight it. In turn, the participants in the course developed an on-line course available for their fellow educators. Four Latvians from government and NGOs have participated in USG-funded anti-TIP visitor programs, with five more scheduled to do so this month. Embassy Riga has worked closely with the GOL on development and implementation of anti-TIP programs.

-- Ambassadorial lunch series: Ambassador Garber has recently launched a series of luncheons, each exploring a theme with several Latvian guests who are prominent in that field. One cornerstone of this series will be luncheons with prominent female leaders in all fields of endeavor -- from politics to the arts and from business to academia -- to discuss the unique challenges facing Latvia's women. These are intended primarily to understand what women in Latvia see as the most important problems they face as a group. These discussions will form the basis for further action planning as our understanding of the trends and opportunities for assistance develops. This does not mean women's issues are relegated to these lunches - we strive for gender balance in every event we host.

-- Educational exchanges: The Embassy has brought attention to women's issues through existing educational programs. One American Fulbright Scholar currently in Latvia is a women's studies specialist. Similarly, in recent years, Latvian participants in Fulbright and other educational programs have specialized in women's issues.

-- Digital Video Conferences: In a series of DVCs, we hosted a conversation with Esther Takeuchi, who holds more patents than any other woman, and is of Latvian ancestry. This example of a strong female leader in a field traditionally dominated by men was one of our best-received events. Similarly, to mark Black History Month, post will be hosting a DVC with scholar and businesswoman A'lelia Bundles on the topic of economic empowerment of women and

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minorities.

15. There are several areas that present opportunities for further engagement:

-- Given additional resources, there are hard-working NGOs including a women's crisis center, shelters for trafficking victims, and a general women's issues NGO with whom we could cooperate productively. In particular, Shelter Association Safe Home receives public funding to implement assistance programs for TIP victims and actively contributes to raising awareness about the issue in Latvia.

On other issues, the Marta Resource Center for Women carries out diverse programs ranging from legal assistance to victims of domestic violence to policy advocacy on gender discrimination. While we exchange information with the Marta Center regularly, identifying focused and specific projects for enhanced cooperation could improve effectiveness. Additional funding could be used to launch new initiatives with either of these organizations or strengthen existing efforts.

-- While we have worked extensively on TIP, additional funding would allow us to devote more effort to domestic violence awareness or intervention programs. Funding permitting, both TIP and domestic violence could be addressed through programs providing training and education to criminal justice officials. The "blame-the-victim" attitude in some sectors remains one of the primary obstacles to effectively reducing violence against women.

-- As Ambassador Garber continues her discussions with diverse groups of Latvian interlocutors, the Embassy hopes to uncover more specific areas where engagement is needed and possible avenues for cooperation with local partners.

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